

# “There is no ‘right time’—everyone’s career will ebb and flow differently”

**Fiona Hickey** has hit a midcareer milestone as the founder of an award-winning practice. Her career advice to other women? Forge your own path in your own time



**M**y career started with a really fantastic experience under a training contract with Deloitte and I got what I considered my first ‘real’ job with Oracle in 2008.

I got stuck in, learned the ropes and got to grips with a new type of office politics. Soon, at age 26, I was forging ahead and happy with my progress.

At that stage, I had no idea that the path I saw laid out before me was not the one I was going to take.

## Shifting priorities

It was around this time that my sister was diagnosed with cancer. It was a tough, and made me realise that I shouldn’t waste any precious time.

So, at 29, some years ahead of my college friends and peers—and only a few short years since starting my first real job with Oracle—I had Danny, my son.

I’m not sure I would have chosen to start a family at that stage if my sister hadn’t fallen ill.

I had so much ambition and a career plan mapped out, but I had also realised that there are no guarantees in life. Starting our family became the direction my husband and I really wanted to go in.

I started a Diploma in Insolvency when I was on maternity leave and Danny had reached the nine-month milestone. Despite the heavy demands of motherhood, I never stopped wanting to learn.

At around the same time, my brother took the brave step of setting up his own company, and I supported him in those early days, spending evenings doing payroll, VAT and book-keeping for his start-up—all tasks I had never done in audit or industry.

This was learning from the ground up, all while wading through the minefield of Revenue tax and CRO filings.

## An unexpected career path

When I returned to my role with Oracle after 13 months’ maternity leave, it was with this new experience in practice work and self-employment.

Looking back, I had stumbled onto a new and unexpected career path. I found it hugely fulfilling but it wasn’t always easy.

Throughout my first pregnancy and maternity leave, and my son’s early years, I felt like my career was stagnating while my friends were making progress and building on exciting opportunities.

I wondered if the time I’d taken to start my family would leave my career forever one step behind my peers.

On the other hand, I found I had such a different drive after my son was born. I still didn’t mind hard work, but I didn’t want to be committed to working like in the same way I had been before his arrival.

My priorities changed. My outlook was different. I decided that if I had fallen behind my peers because I had prioritised my family, it was worth it overall.

**Timing isn't everything**

It was after I had my daughter Hannah aged 31, that I knew I was ready to take the next step in my career: setting up a practice myself in Ashbourne, Co. Meath—my hometown.

At the time, there were no part-time accounting roles for women, including with the Big Four. I needed to create my own position.

Entrepreneurship is in my genes. My father had run his own business, also in Ashbourne, and I wanted to be in practice so I could connect with people at a grassroots level.

To this day, I care so much about each client, their business, and how best to advise and assist them.

I also have profound gratitude towards each client who has come through the door at FAH Chartered Accountants, allowing me to realise my dream of being self-employed.

There was a time when I thought my career would stagnate because I had decided to start a family young.

When I was working hard to build my practice, however, my college peers and friends started taking time out to start their own families.

By the time they were ready to return to their jobs, my own career had kicked off again and my practice was growing.

The time I took for my family was when they built their careers, and the time they took for their families was when I built mine. We were never in competition.

These women are all friends and peers whom I greatly admire, but it just goes to show that there is no such thing as “the right time”. It’s the work and passion you put in, and I was right to start my family when I wanted to.

**Career ebbs and flows**

Everyone has ebbs and flows in their career journey. Whether you want to take time out for family, personal or health reasons, your career can always be kickstarted again.

I hired my first employee six years ago and my practice has continued to grow since.

In 2021, we moved to a bigger bespoke office and we topped the Small Practice category at the 2022 Irish Accountancy Awards as well as being named overall Practice of the Year.

It was a phenomenal achievement for the entire team at FAH Chartered Accountants. On a personal level, however, the practice has become much busier than I had anticipated starting out.

Initially, I expected to work part-time while rearing my family, but my work now is a full-time job, and sometimes more.

The great benefit for me is the flexibility I have, which allows me to plan my week, and each day, around my family’s needs.

Maintaining a work-life balance requires constant effort. There are times when I need to work extra hours in the office, but I can then take extra home time in the days afterwards.



When I am home with my children, I don't take work calls or answer emails. I remain present and enjoy my time with Danny and Hannah, focusing exclusively on our time together.

Do I have to constantly juggle home and work life? Yes. Extra demands in either one can create an imbalance, but with focus and commitment, I can find equilibrium again.

Qualifying as a Chartered Accountant can bring many benefits in terms of your career route and flexibility.

As a qualification, it gives you plenty of opportunity to change path and step back, if and when you need to for personal reasons, before restarting your career again.

No matter what your priorities may be, my advice is to forge your own path. Remember that everyone’s career will ebb and flow differently. Stay open to new opportunities and never be afraid to pivot to get to where you want to be.



**Fiona Hickey is the owner and principal of FAH Chartered Accountants**